

SW

LEGISLATION

AS AFFECTING

THE LABOURING CLASSES.

A Lecture

DELIVERED TO THE

HASLEMERE LIBERAL ASSOCIATION, JANUARY 23, 1885.

(WITH ADDITIONS.)

BY

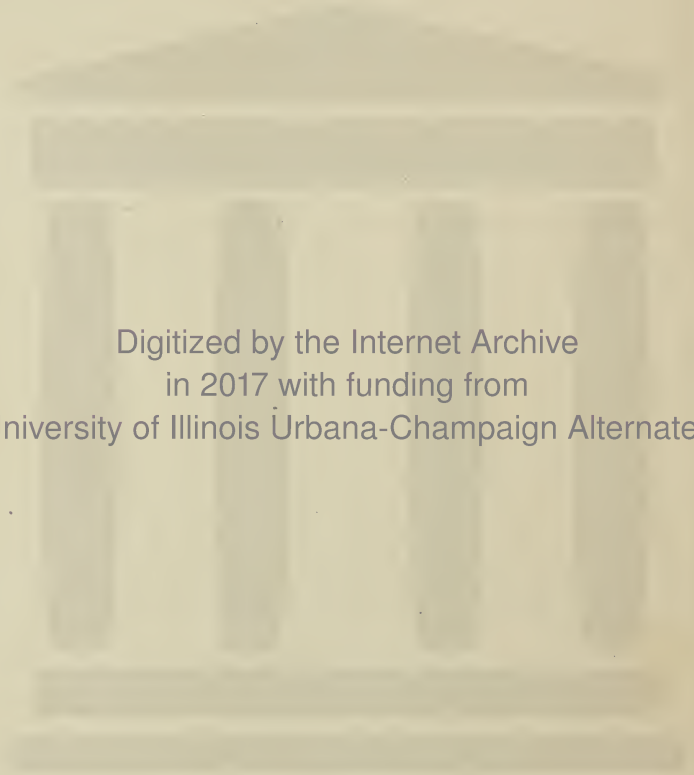
WILLIAM HENRY STONE,

LATE FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

GUILDFORD :

PRINTED AT *THE WEST SURREY TIMES* OFFICE.

1885.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2017 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Alternates

338.9
St 72h
cop. 2

8 D 13 Martin

LEGISLATION AS AFFECTING THE LABOURING CLASSES.

I COULD not help thinking, when the chairman invited me to give an address to the Liberal Association here, that it was probable that the members had had of late almost a sufficient amount of political instruction; and I should have hesitated to volunteer to add anything to what you have heard from the able lecturers who have addressed you during the last few months. At the call of the chairman, however, I was very willing to come and say a few words to you, because I feel, as he has already indicated, that the present is a very important crisis in our history; and that it is very desirable that persons who have had the opportunity of paying rather more attention to the study of political questions should do what they can, be it ever so little, for the assistance of those who have perhaps had fewer advantages, but who will have in the near future so great a share of political power, and therefore of political responsibility. And I desire not only to address the new electors themselves, but to impress upon many, to whom they will look up for guidance and information, the urgent importance of keeping clearly before their minds those sound and well-established principles on which all useful legislation must be based.

What I thought to do this evening was to refer somewhat in detail to the legislation of former times as specially affecting the labouring classes, and to endeavour to see how far

Land. Sch. Econ. & Pol. Sci. Ex

the past can throw a light upon what is necessary or desirable for the future. But it would be scarcely possible to confine any observations within the limits of this description; because there are very few subjects of legislation which concern only one class, and many measures which may at first seem to have no special bearing on the working classes may indirectly affect them. On the other hand, I do not intend to confine myself to matters of legislation in the strictest sense; but shall include more generally the influence which government has upon a country, whether by the passing of laws or in connection with the administration of affairs.

I would remark, in the first place, of legislation mainly affecting the labouring classes, that it is a very modern subject. When we look back upon the history of past centuries, we find wonderfully little about the labourers. If you go back to antiquity, you will find that the great mass of the people were slaves, having no rights whatever, and not thought worthy of any legislation. When we discuss the democracies of the past, we are apt to lose sight of that fact. It is only in very recent times, in any country, that all classes, including the lowest, have had any share in the government. We are told that, at one period in the history of Greece, in the Athenian community there were 400,000 slaves to 20,000 citizens; and the vast bulk of the population were thus considered to have no rights at all. In Rome we find a somewhat similar state of society, and there at one time the laws even gave the master a right to take the life of a slave without responsibility to anyone. If we come on to the history of the early period of modern Europe, we still find that the mass of the lower classes, though not exactly slaves in name, were very much in the same position, under the names of villein or serf; and the main legislation of the country altogether passed them by. When we hear of any law affecting the labourers, it is something of a highly severe and restrictive character. One of the first laws concerning them was passed very soon after the great pestilence known as 'the Black

Death'—the Statute of Labourers, A.D. 1350, by which the rate of wages was fixed, and labourers were forbidden to move from one parish to another under the most severe penalties. That was the kind of legislation enacted if the working classes were thought to be worth making laws about at all; and it was not until the early part of this century that any tendency was shown towards a special consideration of their separate welfare.

The first division of legislation to which I shall ask your attention does not concern the labourers exclusively: it is one which must have a great interest for every class, for the richest as well as for the poorest—I mean the subject of expenditure and taxation. I do not wish to go too much over familiar ground, but it would be a great omission if I were to say nothing on this head. However well taxes may be imposed, and however fairly adjusted between the rich and the poor, the poor man must always be more concerned about their proper regulation than the rich. Suppose that the rich man paid one-tenth of his income in taxation, and the poor man one-twentieth, yet that one-twentieth would involve far more sacrifices on the part of the poor man than the one-tenth would on the part of the rich. We all know that, in fact, the proportion is very much the other way. But, independently of the actual individual amount of taxation, there is the most important question whether the national taxes are so imposed as to interfere as little as possible with the general prosperity of the country. In discussing this subject people sometimes confound two very different things. We must keep separate the two questions of the amount of national expenditure, and the manner of raising it. No doubt, unless the expenditure is reduced, the amount collected cannot be diminished; but nevertheless the burden of a given amount of taxation on a country may be almost indefinitely reduced by wise financial measures. Formerly taxes were imposed without any regard to scientific principles in respect of their effect upon commercial and trading interests. One of the

first of general English taxes was an oppressive and harsh one called the 'Hearth Tax.' This existed up to the end of the seventeenth century, and was a tax levied upon every fireplace in every house. This burden fell in greater proportion upon the poor man than upon the rich; but its chief hardship was that it necessitated a visitation from house to house: the tax-collector entered every room, to the annoyance and inconvenience of house-holders. The financiers of those days thought it an excellent tax, because it could be raised with certainty, though sometimes levied by the seizure of the goods of the poor. It was thought a great improvement when that tax was succeeded by the Window Tax, which was, however, still a serious burden on the dwellings of the poor, leading to deprivation of light and injury to health, and the remnants of its evil effects may still be seen in blocked windows and other defects in the construction of cottages.

Many more examples might be given of such directly mischievous taxes; but, as we all know, the grand improvement of the present century has been the abolition of the fallacious, though plausible, system of Protection. I do not wish to go at any length into a question which is familiar to you all; but just now, when old ideas on the subject of Protection are revived by some politicians, it is very important that the labouring classes should keep clearly in mind what a return to Protection would mean. There has been lately published an interesting comparison, showing what was the condition of things before the repeal of the Corn Laws, and what has happened since, by Mr. Giffen, of the Board of Trade, an eminent statistician, and his conclusions have still more lately been confirmed by Professor Leone Levi. Whatever may be said about depression and dulness of trade and so on, there is no doubt that these gentlemen have established the fact that there is a most extraordinary improvement in the position of working men, due to the removal of the taxes upon food and upon raw material for the use of our manu-

facturers, leading at once to increased work and cheaper food ; and though the lower prices of corn may have unfavourably affected agriculturists, the question really is whether, by a return to Protection for the sake of the interests of a small class, we are to debar the great mass of the population from those necessities and comforts which Free Trade has given them. Mr. Giffen has made out, by comparisons of the payments in several important trades, that wages have risen during the past fifty years from 50 to as much as 150 per cent. ; *i.e.* (in the case of weavers and spinners in some kinds of fabrics) as much as $2\frac{1}{2}$ times more than was received fifty years ago ; whilst the hours of labour have diminished about one-fifth. But the cost of living in some important items has diminished, and in others remained stationary. The price of wheat in the years from 1837—46, as compared with the average of the last ten years, was ten shillings per quarter higher in the first period than in the last ; and it is now at a lower price than ever. What is of even more importance than the actual diminution, is the absence of those great fluctuations to which the prices of the necessities of life were subject before the time of Free Trade, which meant the risk of famine and of actual starvation when the high prices came.

In 1810, wheat was 106s. per quarter ; and in 1812 it was 126s. per quarter ; in the four years up to 1841 the price was over 72s. per quarter. Such prices meant the most violent fluctuations in the absolute necessities of life—changes not accompanied by an equivalent increase of wages, which only grow very gradually. It was no wonder that, under such a state of things, there were riots and disturbances and incendiarism, to which we have been happily strangers since trade has been free. The prices of other things, which are to some extent luxuries to the poor man, have diminished still more. Sugar has fallen from 68s. to 21s., and the price of tea has been reduced enormously, from the abolition of the duty in one case and its reduction in the other ; and the

effect has been to add greatly to the comforts of the working classes, inasmuch as the consumption of tea has increased, since 1841, from $1\frac{1}{4}$ lb. per head per annum to $4\frac{1}{2}$ lb., and that of sugar from 15 lb. to 65 lb., or more than fourfold. This in itself is a conclusive proof of the decided advance in the use of comforts, and of comparative luxuries, amongst the poorer and working classes. And this increase has occurred in spite of circumstances which of themselves would probably have led to an opposite result; viz., the growth of our population, and the closer crowding upon our limited area; and the advance—of which we now hear so much—of competition with us by other nations in all branches of trade and manufactures.

These changes for the better amongst our population are due in large measure to the abolition of our old fiscal system, under which taxes were imposed, for the benefit of special and in the main richer classes, to the detriment of the labourers and the poor, and through them to the real injury of the whole community. Nor must we forget that by the abolition of the paper duties, and stamps on newspapers, the sources of knowledge have been brought within the reach of the poor; while another wise reduction has brought about that marvellous extension of communication by letters through the post.

The other branch of the department of finance—that of National Expenditure—is one on which the new voters may hereafter have something to say. Some of it is, no doubt, of no benefit to the working man, nor, indeed, to anybody else. It is an expenditure which is necessary up to a certain point, but in itself is an almost unmixed evil. It must always be remembered that practically the whole of our National Debt arose from wars in the past. To-day, out of eighty-eight millions of annual expenditure, thirty-one millions are spent on the Army and Navy, and twenty-nine and a half millions for interest and reduction of National Debt; and the money spent under the last head is quite as much a war expenditure

as that for the army and navy. I think the new voters will ask themselves how many of those millions have been spent in attempts to achieve the impossible, to prop up hopelessly fallen causes, and to turn back the irresistible tide of natural forces ; how many for objects utterly unprofitable, when they have been attained, to ourselves or to anyone else ; how many, alas ! in fighting on the wrong side, in supporting tyranny and oppression, or even in undisguised and greedy robbery on our own account. The poor man is trebly interested in questions of peace and war : he feels the war-tax most severely, he himself is the food for powder, and he suffers first when trade is stopped. And it is not only in actual war that public money may be wasted ; there may be, and has been, enormous extravagance of military expenditure in time of peace. Just now there is a strong pressure on our Government to strengthen our navy, and that the British navy must be strong no one will dispute. But working men will remember that an ironclad vessel may represent what is equal to a year's labour of from 5,000 to 10,000 men, which might have been employed in increasing the wealth of the community ; and that many an ironclad has become obsolete without having been once used for any purpose whatever, not even for its own work of destruction. They will therefore, I trust, insist—in military and naval expenditure above all other—on the strictest care and economy, or millions will still be wasted under the influence of panics, and on ephemeral and useless fancies.

But, on the other hand, there is much public expenditure which is beneficial, and from which the labouring classes reap their full share, or more. Such is the outlay on public improvements—the maintenance of roads, the erection of bridges, the improvement of towns, and the like ; or again, expenditure for inspection of factories and workshops, the examination of the affairs of Friendly Societies, and the sanitary inspection of houses ; which latter is mainly for the good of the poor, since the rich man can better protect himself,

though, no doubt, all classes of society profit directly or indirectly. But the most striking item under this head of classification is the immense expenditure—now four and a half millions a year—for primary education, on which I shall say a few words presently. I mention these things to show that, whilst the imposition of the taxes has been re-arranged in such a way that many burdens have been taken off, and the condition of the labourer has immensely improved, at the same time the expenditure of public money includes many things which are for his especial benefit.

The next subject on which I shall touch is very important, and concerns the working classes above all others: I mean the Administration of the Poor Laws and the Relief of the Poor. The history of these laws is very curious and instructive. In the earliest days the laws were very stringent against the labourer, in compelling him to remain in one place, in interfering to prevent any attempt to raise wages, and especially in attempting to put down begging. As an example, a law of Edward VI. provided that every man who refused to work should be apprehended and branded with 'V,' as a vagabond, and should be put to do the most disagreeable and the hardest work which could be found for him, and fed upon refuse food, with a little water to drink. If he continued to beg, and was found to be still wandering and idle, he was to be again apprehended and branded with 'S,' signifying that he was the slave of the whole community, and to be compelled to work without any wages at the call of anyone. That law was actually placed upon the Statute-book, though probably never acted upon to any great extent.

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth was passed the first Poor Law Act, by which it was provided that every poor man who was in want was to be supported and maintained at the expense of his parish; and in a general way that has remained the law of the land ever since. At first, and for many generations, the effect of the law was intended to be, and was, that every man should be made to work, and should be kept

in a place where he would be compelled to work, if he received relief. From mistaken notions of benevolence at a later period, in the reign of George III., and subsequently, that law was very much relaxed. Out-door relief was allowed to be given, and also payments to labourers in augmentation of wages. The history of the effect of those changes in the law is a remarkable instance of what evil may be done by legislation inspired by benevolent motives, without being based on sound principles. At first the idea appeared a very plausible one, and it was supported by the plea that the expense of maintaining paupers would be reduced, by assisting them to support themselves; but after thirty or forty years' experience it was found that the evils of the plan had become altogether intolerable. Just before the passing of the Reform Bill a Commission of Inquiry was appointed; and one of the early Acts passed by the Reformed House was the Poor Law, nearly as it now exists. At that time it was found that in some instances the whole of the labourers in a parish were receiving relief from the poor-rate; and many estates, and at least one whole parish, had actually been allowed to go out of cultivation because the rates had become so heavy that they exceeded the produce of the land. At that time there was a custom of dividing all the paupers out to work amongst the tenant-farmers and others, and the ratepayer had to take these people, whether he liked them or not. The farmer had thus an apparent advantage; he paid these pauper labourers just what he liked; but many of the paupers were so idle and inefficient that it was impossible to get any effective work out of them. Whole gangs were kept all day doing nothing, but were supported at the expense of the parish. The man who desired to work on his own account was often ridiculed so much that he became a pauper in his turn. There was also a plan which looked very benevolent, of giving every labourer an allowance according to the number of his children; but it was followed by most disastrous results in the encouragement of early and improvident

marriages. Illegitimate children shared in this allowance, and a premium was thus placed upon immorality, since a woman with a family of three or four was maintained in a life of comfortable idleness. The state of society amongst the poor had reached a condition which can scarcely now be realized, and it may be interesting to quote the report of one of the Assistant Commissioners.

‘This evil,’ he says—that of the intolerable burden of the rates—‘however great, sinks into insignificance compared with the dreadful effects which the system produces on the morals and happiness of the lower orders. A person must converse with paupers—must enter workhouses and examine the inmates—must attend at the parish payments—before he can form a just idea of the moral debasement which is the offspring of the present system; he must hear the pauper threatening to abandon his wife and family unless more money is allowed him—threaten to abandon an aged and bed-ridden mother, to turn her out of his house and lay her down at the overseer’s door, unless he is paid for giving her shelter—he must hear parents follow the same course in respect to their sick children—he must see mothers coming to receive the reward of their daughters’ ignominy . . . It is as difficult to convey to the mind of the reader a true and faithful impression of the intensity and malignity of the evil in this point of view as it is to give an adequate idea of the horrors of a shipwreck or a pestilence.’

That was the state of things brought about by a benevolent law which was not based on sound principles of political economy. That state of things has passed away, and we now have comparatively strict rules, forbidding out-door relief except in certain cases, and, as far as possible, insisting that those who require relief should go into the workhouses. That system has not been carried quite far enough; but it has been much improved of late by the Union Chargeability Act, which extended the area of rating, and particularly in London by the Metropolitan Poor Law Act of 1870, which

spread the charge for in-door poor over the whole metropolis, while that of the out-door poor remained on the separate parishes. The effect has been that while the proportion of in-door paupers has greatly increased, the whole number has decreased. It is evident that the system of compelling those who apply for relief to go into the workhouse, though at first sight it may seem both hard and wasteful, does diminish pauperism, and helps to remove one of the great blots on the social condition of this country. That there is much yet to be done in this direction will appear from the fact that in Wales the percentage of out-door paupers is 82, and in London only 25 of the whole number. In the whole of England and Wales, between 1849 and 1883, the number of out-door paupers decreased from 955,000 to 599,000, while that of in-door paupers increased only from 133,000 to 182,000; and between 1873 and 1883 the percentage of all paupers to the population decreased from 38 to 29. This is a substantial improvement, but it leaves much to be desired.

How far the reduction of pauperism can be carried by legislation or otherwise is one of the most important questions of the future. There have been proposals for a scheme of compulsory payment in the way of assurance by every person in the kingdom, so that every one, at a certain age, would be required to make a contribution towards a public fund, and would be able, when the time comes, instead of asking as a dependent for charity at the public expense, to say that he had contributed for the purpose, and therefore was entitled to support out of the National Fund. Whether such an arrangement is practicable or not I do not now propose to consider; but so long as there are seven or eight hundred thousand paupers in this country, we cannot say that legislation has had its full and satisfactory effect. There are two sides to the whole question. The law that every poor man has a right to support at the public expense, so as to save him from starvation, has probably been one cause why we have been saved from those violent disturbances—those frequently recurring revolutions, which have

had such disastrous effects in many other countries. On the other hand, I think that perhaps the one greatest defect in the English character is the want of thrift, and this may be due to the knowledge that at the worst every man has a public fund to fall back upon, which makes no distinction between the sober man and the drunkard, between the idle spend-thrift and the victim of unavoidable misfortune. The French, no doubt, are a much less stable people politically than ourselves; but they are far more thrifty and saving, and some of their best observers attribute the difference to the cause which I have indicated. I must not omit to refer to the establishment of Savings Banks and Life Insurance under public management, measures the fruits of which are already considerable, and will become continually more important.

A departure from the principles of strict political economy may appear to have been made by the recent provision of primary education far below its actual cost, and to that extent at the public expense. The incalculable advantages which must result from this measure would justify almost any such theoretical irregularity; but it is easy to perceive the wide difference between assistance in this form and the gift of money or food. The education of a man's children does not give him any direct immediate advantage; on the contrary, he is often a serious loser by deprivation of the earnings of his family, in addition to which he has in most cases to pay some substantial part of the cost in the shape of fees. There is therefore no danger that the provision of public elementary schools, supported by rates and taxes, will produce the same demoralizing effects as the indiscriminate almsgiving of which I have just been speaking. Again, education is a matter of so special a character that it would be impossible for a poor and ignorant class of parents to provide it for their children in a satisfactory manner without aid from the State; but State interference almost necessarily implies some grant of public money. In addition to this, we must remember that there are in this matter the arrears of

past generations to make up, and it would be unreasonable to expect parents to be very willing to provide for their children at a great sacrifice that which they never received themselves. At the same time I cannot agree with those who think that we should go farther, and give every child a free education. The argument that compulsory attendance equitably involves free schools, implies that every man has a right to bring into the world as many children as he pleases, and throw them upon society, incapable of providing for their own livelihood, and even untrained to the most elementary duties. This appears to me a dangerous error, and I should be sorry to see carried any further the sacrifice of independence necessarily involved in the present system. However this may be, the educational legislation of recent years is beyond question the greatest boon which has ever been conferred on the labouring classes of this country, and its benefits will be felt throughout society in the diminution of crime and pauperism, and the increase of productive power. How great the change is may be understood when I mention that fifty years ago the first vote of £20,000 for education was only obtained in spite of the most strenuous opposition, whilst the grant of last year was $4\frac{1}{2}$ millions sterling.

The next branch of legislation on which I shall touch is the character and administration of our penal laws. I fear it may almost sound offensive to include this amongst the subjects of legislation specially affecting the working classes; but without saying, as some persons may, that laws have been made by the rich to be obeyed by the poor, it will not be unfair to say that the poor man must in many cases be more tempted to a breach of the law than the rich, especially when we remember how large a proportion of our penal laws are concerned with offences against property. I dare say many of you are acquainted with the history of our penal laws, and are aware that some of the greatest changes in English legislation have taken place in this department. In the past century there were 160 capital offences named in our law-

books ; and Bills increasing the number were brought in session after session, and passed almost without discussion. When an attempt was first made by Sir Samuel Romilly to abolish some of these punishments, he was met by the most determined opposition ; and if he passed any Bill through the House of Commons it was certain to be thrown out in the Lords. A statute making it a capital offence to associate for more than one month with people called ‘Egyptians,’ *i.e.*, gypsies, was in force at one time, and under it thirteen persons were hanged at one Assize. Stealing goods of a greater value than forty shillings was punishable by hanging ; and stealing linen exposed in a bleaching-ground was also a capital crime.

A strange provision in those times of severity was known as ‘the benefit of clergy.’ If a man sentenced to death was not able to read, he had to be hung ; but if he could read, his life was spared. It was the business of the Clerk of the Assize to test the prisoners on this point ; and if he were a humane man, he would let many pass with very scanty scholarship. Sometimes, however, the judges were very strict ; and if they found that a condemned man could not really read, he was sent to the gallows. The effect of this privilege was to give the richer man, who had had some education, an exemption from punishment. Not only has that privilege been entirely abolished, but all the hanging Acts have long passed away, partly because the feeling against these statutes became so strong that no jury would convict under them. A woman was indicted for stealing a £10 note, and convicted ; but the jury found that the value of it was only 39s., so as to bring it below the statutory limit of 40s., larcenies to the amount of which involved hanging.

Connected with this is another matter in which an extraordinary change has taken place ; that is, in the treatment of prisoners and in the state of prisons. Nothing could have been more horrible than the state of those dungeons of which we read down to the early part of this century. And not only

prisoners for criminal offences, but also those detained for debt were sufferers ; and, in the latter class, a man might be kept in prison for life by the action of a single creditor. At that time the prisons were filthy and unwholesome to the last degree ; there was often no separation of sexes, and no discrimination between a boy or girl committed for a first offence, and a confirmed criminal. In all these points an entire reformation has taken place, not the least important part of which has been the establishment of industrial schools and reformatories for the detention and training of young persons who have entered or are verging on a criminal career.

Another class of laws especially affecting the labouring class are those connected with the relation of master and servant. The earliest English laws affecting labour attempted to lay down the exact amount of wages each workman should receive. Anyone who made an attempt to raise those wages, or who tried to get more than the statutory rate, was punished very severely. Within the present century, it was unlawful for any skilled artisan to leave the kingdom, and a man who did so dared not return under pain of imprisonment. When it was found that these laws were ineffectual, all combinations of workmen were forbidden under repressive penalties. Shortly before the Reform of Parliament, Joseph Hume succeeded in getting the Combination Acts repealed ; and the tendency of modern legislation has been more and more, whilst protecting working men against force or intimidation, to allow perfect freedom of open combination for the purpose of attempting to raise wages. Whether it is always wise to do that is another question ; but it is only by allowing the free operation of natural causes that we can bring about a proper solution of the wages question. I hope we have reached a time when arbitration and friendly settlements are coming more and more into operation. Working men must see that any combination to keep up wages for which there is no fair ground may in the end make quite as great diffi-

culties for them as for their masters. When we have to face a growing competition with foreign manufacturers, the result will probably be to drive that particular trade into the hands of the foreigner and defeat the very end they had in view.

In connection with this subject I would mention legislation arising under what are called the Factory Acts. Before any such Acts were passed, terrible suffering was inflicted on children and young people, in excessive hours of labour and work for which they were entirely unfitted—especially in mines, where girls and women were employed under conditions of incredible indecency and hardship. In protecting young children the law has a perfect right to step in, to prevent injury to health and ill-treatment. On the other hand, when it is proposed that women shall be subject to like legal restrictions, the question presents greater difficulty; and we have to consider whether such interference does not produce hardship as well as benefit, by the deprivation of earnings; and whether it is not better to leave adults of either sex to their own judgment, and trust to those natural feelings which would keep them from accepting any employment for which they are not fitted.

Connected with this subject is also that of compensation to workmen in cases of accident during their employment, which, as you are no doubt aware, has been effectually secured by a recent Act. In fact, the scope of modern legislation seems to be increasing, at least as far as good intentions can go, in favour of this particular class; since I find from a list of the most important measures passed through Parliament in three years, that in 1880, 3 out of 10, in 1882, 10 out of 26, and in 1883, 10 out of 18, referred specially to them.

I have, however, left to the last the class of measures which has just now perhaps the greatest interest for us. It is difficult to realize how small a share, and even how small a possibility of interest, the poor can have had in the ordinary current of public affairs a century or two ago. In the

seventeenth century no newspaper was allowed to insert any political news, nor might any person publish it without authority from the Crown. But it would have been of little use to publish anything for the information of a class who could not read, or to print newspapers when there were no means of circulating them. Independently of direct political power, the growth during the present century of knowledge and interest, and so far of indirect influence, amongst the mass of the people, must have been immense. The Reform Act of 1868, followed by that just passed through Parliament, has completed the work, by conferring upon nearly every adult man among the working class an actual direct influence over the government of his country.

It might almost occur to some of us to say, when so much has been done for the working man by Parliaments which he has not returned, what did he want more, and why could he not have trusted his betters to continue making laws for him? It would be useless to discuss that question here and now—I will merely answer shortly: first, for his own education, for the moral and intellectual training which may be given by the conscientious exercise of a vote, and for the difference there is between receiving a favour and working something out for yourself as a right; secondly, for the sake of the whole edifice of government, which must always stand more firmly as its base is broadened.

To conclude, I have made out, I think, a pretty long list of legislative benefits conferred on the labouring class in modern times, consisting largely, we must admit, in correction of the ignorance and tyranny of older days. Let us ask for a moment, what is the moral of all this? It seems to me that the great moral we may find and lay to heart is that this legislation has been carried out in favour of the poor by other classes than their own, because those people had a grasp of certain principles of sound legislation; and the chief of those principles is that it has been the interest, as well as the duty, of the classes which have political power, to exercise it not for the

exclusive benefit of themselves, but for the advantage of the whole community. There are two maxims derived from Christianity which appear to sum up much of the principles of Liberalism. One is: 'If one member suffer, all the members suffer with it.' The other: 'Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.' Those two maxims come from St. Paul, but they might very well be written over the door of every Liberal meeting-place, because they embody the principles on which Liberal legislation has done so much towards improving the condition of this community. I want to impress upon those who are about to receive political power, that they ought to follow these lines in the exercise of that power. There are plans and projects for the exclusive benefit of the working classes, which I question whether it will be of much use for them to take up. Amongst the schemes now exciting attention in some quarters are the doctrines taught by Mr. Henry George. It is a wonderful indication of the state of perfect security into which good government has brought this country, that such revolutionary doctrine may be preached in the very centre of the city of London in the open day, without any disturbance amongst those assembled, or interference on behalf of the authorities. Mr. George, as a panacea for all the ills of our social life, says that all land should be taken possession of by the State, and that on no account must there be any idea of purchase or compensation to present owners. He says that those in possession have no right, because no man ever can have a right, to own land; and that the State must take it from them and use it for the public benefit. On the surface, the main objection to such a doctrine is that, when once applied to land, it is not likely that it would be allowed to stop there. Mr. George thinks that land is a special thing, of which no one has a right of separate possession. But some one else may come forward and assert a similar idea in regard to other and personal property, and may set up the same argument as to the existence of a defect

in the title; and if ideas of that kind come to be established, no amount of prescription will be of any use. It is very easy to see that, under such conditions, the foundations of society would be upset. And, though working men might expect to get some little benefit by the arrangement, they will understand that as soon as one of them has gained a little property by his own thrift and labour, his fellows will be pretty sure to want a share of it. How far Mr. George is making way I do not know. He has written and spoken on the subject with great force and eloquence, and may have made converts; but I hope working men will not be led away to exercise the power they are to receive in such a direction. Such a course would certainly lead to most violent conflicts of classes without any benefit resulting to anybody.

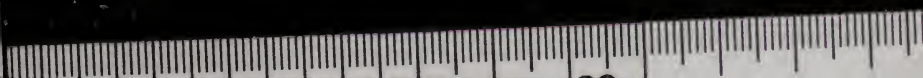
I only now wish to make a special application to our own position as a Liberal Association. While enumerating measures beneficial to the labouring class, we shall not forget that these, and many which I have not had time to mention, have been carried out when, speaking broadly, the Government has been directly or indirectly in the hands of the Liberal Party. And not only have we done all this, but in doing it we have broken down a mass of opposition and have overcome the resistance of many selfish interests strongly opposed to these changes. We have so completely swept away all the force of objections by the enormous experience of the success of our measures, that that class of obstacle has almost disappeared. We are brought to a state of things in which our opponents take up no definite line of resistance, but only endeavour to pick holes in any proposal of the existing Government. We have not now to force our way onwards, so much as to regulate and guide the forces of progress. The working voter will be surrounded by claimants for his favour, vying with each other who can promise him the most. I ask him to consider for himself whether there are sound principles at the bottom of such gitations as those I have glanced at, or whether they are not

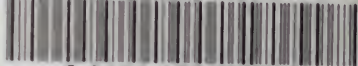
rather found in such legislation as I have been describing.* And when Conservatives seem to offer the same, or better, things than Liberals, 'Which party,' it should be asked, 'can give us the best securities?' Is it those who have steadily resisted each step of progress in its turn, and who have even quite lately been advocating a tax on bread under the name of Fair Trade; or is it the party who, during the last fifty years, have been able to do so much to improve the position of the working man, without his direct assistance, that they may be expected to bring their work to perfection now that they have called him into their councils?

* Old-fashioned Political Economy has been a good deal disparaged of late, but the following facts may be worth recalling. Jeremy Bentham, one of the strictest teachers of the school, began to write about 1780. An introduction to his works, written about 1843, enumerates twenty-three of the most prominent improvements in modern legislation, which at that date had been effected, and which had all been advocated by Bentham. Ten others are named as still to come, and with very trifling exceptions all have now been adopted. They include Free Trade, National Education, Cheap Postage, and almost every step of progress above referred to.



3 0112 062025389





3 0112 062025389